

# **Stitches of Love**

**Anti-Broadcast**

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# Summary

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## Description:

It's the holidays. What is Yule, anyway?

# 1. Stitches of Love

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## Stitches Of Love

Flurries of snow rushed against the windowpanes of the Alexandrian Castle. Outside, the town had become a winter wonderland. The frozen ice gleamed over the cobblestone and the river surrounding the premise had slowed beneath the wintry mix. In Alexandria itself, the citizens enjoyed the frost bitten air and snowflakes falling over them. It was a relief from the humid, stuffy summer they had lived through. Bells rang out from the street vendors as they pedaled their wares of smoked Zaghno, perfect for the holidays, along with homemade candles, silk blouses, and spinning tops for the children. In the far eastern district, the small pond that sat between a block of homes had frozen over and the children furiously begged their mothers to adhere blades to their boots. The ice was shaven down as several dozen people whirled around each other and howled with excitement.

The Castle of Alexandria was not missing out on the joy of the season, either. Maids ran about the hallways and winding staircases, weaving garland

and silver tinsel to balustrades and railings. The Knights of Pluto helped out by scrambling up the tall ladders and securing decorations of velvet red bows, satin strings, and wreaths of pine from the chandeliers. Everyone worked tirelessly by dusting the never-ending surfaces, mopping and waxing the dining halls and meeting chambers. Several tables and chairs were arranged in the massive ballroom where, in just a few days time, the grand Yule Ball would be held. Down the narrow hallway off the end of the ballroom was the kitchen. The cooks tossed logs into the clay ovens while others hurried around, checking the baking bread and stirring the bubbling pots. Staying out of the way near the entrance was Queen Garnet of Alexandria.

At nineteen years old, her dark onyx hair had been braided and coiled around the crown of her head. That day, she sported a warm red sweater with a crisp white collar peaking out the top. The bottom of her button up was untucked and running just a tad longer than her sweater, overlapping a black skirt that lead down to legs covered in wool stockings. It was the trial of the menu Lead Chef Quina had come up with. Garnet's hands fidgeted together as she held them behind her back. She was nervous, but she'd never admit it. Nearly a year ago, on her nineteenth

birthday, she had been shocked by a miracle and an answer to her awful cries: the return of Zidane. They had hurriedly wed as the spring waned into summer. Garnet was now eager to show Zidane what a true Alexandrian Yule was all about. It was very important to her.

“You come test,” Quina waved their hand widely as they hovered over a steaming pot. “This classic beef stew. Very popular in Treno.”

Gracefully, Garnet dipped her spoon in, collecting a fragrant broth, a chunk of beef, and a soft piece of potato. After a moment, she nodded. “It has a slight kick to it, but oddly, it’s sweet.”

“Mustard seeds and chili flakes,” Quina told her before drawing her attention to a sheet of golden brown biscuits. “Bread baked with raisins.”

“Oh, I already know this will be good,” Garnet grinned as she ripped a biscuit in half. Warm steam rose from the delicate layers. “This was one of my favorites as a child. I could eat the entire pan myself if you let me.” She happily tore it apart and ate it as Quina marched her across the kitchen. Together, they knelt down and peered in. Over the flames contained within the clay stove sat a large, glazed hunk of meat.

“Roasted Zagnol,” Quina told her, reaching in with no fear and placing the pan on top. They then immediately began brushing it with a gritty, dark brown glaze. “Brown sugar, maple syrup from Dali. Make Zagnol sweet, not dry.” Garnet smiled, watching as Quina carried on the task with the finest precision.

“Quina, everything is shaping up nicely. I have no doubt the Yule Ball will be grand and tasty,” Garnet told them. “Do we have enough for all the guests?”

“Everyone take plate of leftovers,” Quina declared, setting the brush and ramekin aside and walking across the kitchen to another tall pot that rumbled with heat. “Fish stew. Eiko’s recipe, except I make better.”

“Oh, bold claim,” Garnet arched her eyebrows as they lifted the top off. Her senses were immediately greeted by the smell of peppery rosemary and boiled carrots. “It smells divine.”

“Eiko forget one thing,” Quina said, flapping an oven mitt back and forth to dispel the steam. “Tomato.”



“Ah, yes, I could see why that would be important,” Garnet nodded, watching as the stew whirled around the pot. “Though, I suppose we should give her some slack. How easy do you think it is to find a tomato in Madain Sari?”

“I no try,” Quina shrugged, banging their wooden spoon against the edge. “I just make tasty.”

“Well, everything looks really promising, Quina,” Garnet turned to them. “I look forward to seeing the spread you and your team come up with for the Yule Ball.”

“Jams that match color of festivities. Cookies in shape of snowflakes and trees,” Quina rambled on as they continued to prance ambitiously around the kitchen. “Ball of rice that look like ball of snow! Hot chocolate to take chill off! Spongy cake to look like log...!”

Slowly, Garnet was making her way for the door. She cast a polite grin in the direction of the other cooks, who thought it was quite humorous. Quina hadn’t noticed a thing as the Queen pressed an index finger to her lips and slipped out. She hadn’t realized just how warm the kitchen had been as she rolled her sleeves and headed down the massive hallway. Next on her checklist was the ballroom where, in just a

few days time, there was to be the grandest, most anticipated holiday party in all of Alexandria. The back alley celebrations, sticky with spiked apple cider, and thundering with rowdy music, were probably a hoot. But there was something special about the Alexandrian Yule Ball. Garnet grinned as she came into the ballroom, noticing the hollies accenting the ropes on the curtains. The room was fresh with the scent of pine. Above the doorway, Garnet admired the arrangement of mistletoes. On the tables that would host Quina's feast, the red winter sun candles glowed warmly. The traditional nature of the Alexandrian Castle's Yule Ball was something very unique. The people fawned over the age old practices that unfolded in front of them, from the music to fur shawls and loud fabrics, Yule at the Alexandrian Castle was a memory to be cherished, always.

Garnet turned to look at the far end of the ballroom, where the wall length windows allowed the brightness of the snowstorm outside to bleed in. There, she spied the yule tree standing a proud twelve feet tall, bristling with its pointy little needles. Silvery tinsel ran its lengths, accented with fragrant cloves and perfectly balanced pine cones. Garnet's boots clicked against the polished floors as

she approached it. She tilted her head back, spying the hand woven ornaments that had been handed down from generation to generation. Little bells glinted in the afternoon light. It smelled so lovely as Garnet came to a pause just a few feet short of it. It had been years since Garnet had felt genuine excitement for Yule. She felt like a little girl all over again. A maid emerged from the bristling side of the Yule tree, giving a slight bow as she continue placing the ornaments on the tree with finesse and great concentration. There was shuffling on the other side. Garnet turned her smile in that direction and just a beat later, her face was covered in complete confusion.

There was her husband, the king-consort of Alexandria. He was tossing a silver orbed ornament up and down in his palm, searching the Yule tree high and low for a lonely spot. That wasn't what perplexed Garnet, however. Draping Zidane's torso, practically swallowing his neck, was the loudest sweater she'd ever seen. It was an overexcited composure of colors. Red stripes, green stripes, yellow hems, and blue cuffs hugging his wrists. On the chest, a big holly was stitched in. Zidane whistled a jaunty tune as he reached up and secured the ornament.

That's when he did a double take, realizing Garnet was standing there, staring at him as if he had grown two heads. "Hey, Dagger," he smiled, reaching down for another ornament. He then held his arms out at his side, bursting with excitement. 'I've never seen a Yule tree this big! Hell, growing up, it was rarely green!' She was still silent, her eyebrows arched upward. "What? Something wrong with my hair?" Zidane reached up, raking his blond locks from the frame of his face.

Garnet crossed her arms over her chest, casting him a weary, deadpanned look. "What in the world are you wearing?"

He seemed almost incredulous in that moment. "It's a Yule sweater!"

"It's tacky."

"It's tradition!" Zidane shot back, tossing the ornament back into the wicker basket and coming towards Garnet. "Don't tell me royals don't wear the traditional Yule sweater."

"Don't you think it's a bit... loud?" Garnet tilted her head to the side.

Zidane brushed past her, watching the maids smooth all the invisible wrinkles out from the

tablecloths, delicately stitched with vibrant hollies. The red sun candles were very precariously centered and each table looked nearly identical with the accents of garland and sparkling tinsel. He glanced over his shoulder at Garnet.

“Isn’t Yule supposed to be magical and fun?”

“It is,” Garnet came to stand beside him. Across the room, the massive brick fireplace was adorned with stars and snowflakes that were said to have been handcrafted by the first Queen to sit on the throne of Alexandria. As the room fell into place, it became increasingly more nostalgic and sentimental for Garnet. Her fondest memories were when she was a little girl, being doted on by her parents, and fawned over by the citizens. Garnet remembered wearing a silver gown when she was eight. It had tulle see-through sleeves that flared out at her wrists. A sweetheart neckline with a straight bodice, leading to a full skirt that ballooned and made Garnet feel like she was walking on thin air. It had been a while since that spark of the holiday season had warmed her as it had in that moment. But maybe it was because she finally had someone she loved beside her again. “I remember Yule always being so magical and enticing.”

“This all seems so calculated and precise, though,” Zidane protested, shaking his head. “Yule is about seeing who can drink the most spiked apple cider without getting their sweater dirty. And seeing who can get the most popcorn in the top hat. It’s all about games and good times. Waiting the night out!”

“Well, at the Alexandrian Yule Ball, we do... some of those things,” Garnet turned to him. “But with so many people, there has to be more structure. There will still be strings of popcorn and apple cider. All things traditional will be right here in this very room. It will just be a little different than what you’re used to.”

Zidane pursed his lips for a moment as he watched the maids decorate the mantle of the fireplace with waxy candles varying in height. “What about your sweater? What design is your go-to?”

Garnet wanted to sigh as she looked into her husband’s sweet, sweet cerulean blue eyes. In his seven months as the official king-consort, it had been quite a learning curve for the young thief turned aristocrat. During their travels, Zidane had been charismatic, charming, and a bonafide leader. Just three weeks after their marriage, though, she

remembered his frustration over not remembering what a salad fork was compared to a steak fork. He hated the stiff collars of all his formal shirts. He tried to get away with a tie as much as he could, claiming bow ties were for chumps. Zidane did his best to learn the law and justice that was served from the throne. He dutifully stood at Garnet's side for all occasions. But there was no washing away the real Zidane. Not that Garnet wanted to, anyway. She loved how he challenged the protocols and expectations of being a king, whether he realized it or not. He still didn't know why he got such a sharp gasp from the nobles once for putting his elbows on the table. When they met the Duke and Duchess of Treno over the summer, Zidane had shocked everyone by offering just a hearty handshake and a 'hey' to the Duke's wife. That was Zidane, though, and Garnet loved every inch of his soul.

"I don't have a Yule sweater," Garnet finally told him, watching as the maids began to light the fire. Outside, it didn't look like the snow was letting up in the least.

"You're *joking*, right?" Zidane arched his eyebrows. It was her turn to grow the second head. "But that's like the whole point of Yule! I mean... that's what Baku always said was important. It was

easier to act a fool and celebrate if we looked the part. But it's tradition."

"Well..." Garnet was sheepish now, picking imaginary lint from her sweater. "We all have different traditions. You may have received a new Yule sweater every year, but for me, it was gowns."

Zidane's eyes were sharp now as he stared his wife down. She seemed to be growing bashful. "Dagger... don't tell me that means..."

"Just one evening," Garnet held her hands up. Zidane tilted his head back and let out a big sigh. He then paced away, pressing his hands to his hips. 'Everyone dresses to the nines for this ball, Zidane.' She followed after his steps. "It's tradition here."

"Why does everything have to get so bastardized and stiff?" Zidane shook his head, tapping his boot against the gleaming polished floors. "Why can't it just be simple?"

Garnet hugged herself as she looked at the back of Zidane. She knew just how different and, often times, jarring it was in the world within castle walls. Things truly were never black and white. Sometimes it all overwhelmed and confused her, too. She agreed that their lunches didn't need six separate



types of silverware. And it was very true that the maid's were too on top of things, practically sweeping up at their heels behind them. The debutante balls hosted at the castle were becoming offensively outdated and the hunter's banquet was more of like a retirement ceremony. Garnet understood. She had grown up surrounded by all the little nuances that made many questions surface in her mind. Marrying Zidane, however, had just really pulled the curtain back on how much the castle dictated in their lives, whether it made sense or not.

Zidane had wandered towards the window, watching the flurrying blankets of snow rush by. As she came to stand beside him, her fingers fidgeted in front of her. After a moment, she looked to the side of his face. Zidane's facial expression didn't make him out to be as dismayed as his voice seemed. He seemed quite content to be watching the weather beyond the windowpanes. Finally, she licked her lips and joined him in looking out at the winter wonderland.

"I know since being here, practically everything has been different. I know the feeling," she hunched her shoulders as she spoke. Slowly, Zidane peaked at her from the corner of his eyes. "When I first left the castle with you, I realized I didn't know a thing. But

you knew everything. And it has been very interesting, Zidane, to see the shoe on the other foot this time around. I know it's frustrating. I know it's annoying. But Yule... it is some of my happiest memories here in the castle. Before everything went so horribly wrong there was this ball, where I could pretend to be the princess I desperately wanted to be."

Zidane smirked and lowered his eyes to look at his obnoxious sweater. "I'm guessing the princess you wanted to be would never be caught dead with a prince charming dressed like this?"

Garnet busted out in a laugh that made several maid's glance their direction. "To be quite honest, I don't think I ever knew about Yule sweaters."

"What a waste."

"But I bet you don't know what the mistletoes are for," Garnet grinned widely, pointing towards the curtain rods above them.

Zidane shrugged, furrowing his brow. "They smell good?"

"Mmm..." Garnet chuckled, "You and I have a lot to teach each other about Yule."

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### *Three Days Later*

The halls of the Alexandrian Castle were filled with the gentle crooning of a piano. The faintest plucks of harp strings accompanied it along with a soft energy from a violin. In the grand foyer, a steady stream of guests were funneling in. The help, Squad Beatrix, and Knights of Pluto worked in tandem taking coats from the women and offering drinks of peppermint bourbon and spiked apple cider. Everyone was already in good spirits. The women hugged and gossiped. The men nodded to their companions and commented on the barreled age of their drinks. Soon, the large ballroom was lively with guests who ebbed and flowed, delighted by the refreshments and delicious holiday treats. As the icy moon began to rise and the sleet began to fall, the guests flocked inward and the warm spiced wine began to flow freely. The ginger and lemon bars were in hot demand and Chef Quina lead his kitchen like an orchestra, pushing chocolate mousse and pork pies out to appease the masses.

Several floors up, Garnet sat in her silent chamber. There was no laughter ringing out, clinking of glasses, or festive music. It was Garnet by herself, watching as the heavy snow drifted past

the windows. Just a narrow corridor away, Zidane was in his own dressing chambers. Garnet stood from the plush vanity bench and approached the tall mirror tucked in the corner of the room, away from the dark stained cabinets containing the entirety of her wardrobe. A new Yule gown; the first in three years. Her father had passed right before Yule and the city of Alexandria was sent into a period of mourning. The next year, the world itself was in havoc. Garnet had completely forgotten about the holiday. And just twelve months before, Garnet had been in her own mourning because Zidane wasn't there and she didn't know where he was. But in that moment, as she stared at her reflection, she felt a semblance of being whole again. And it felt like it had been forever since she had had that feeling.

Her gown was silver, just as it had been when she was eight years old. Sheer tulle that glittered in the soft night reached across her collarbone and up to her neck. It streamlined down her slender arms, flaring at her wrists. The bodice was satin silver that shimmered with every moment. It was form fitting against her, running to her waist where, now defined and older, Garnet had opted for an A-line skirt that rippled around her legs. Her onyx hair had been braided at the crown of her head and a small,

modest, and dainty tiara was nestled in. Tenderly, Garnet ran her hand along the boning and took in a deep breath. The meaning of Yule felt defined in every stitch of the fabric.

But, then again, what was the true meaning of Yule?

Garnet furrowed her brow as she sat back down at her vanity. She began organizing her variety of cosmetics and creams as she contemplated the matter. In her youth, Garnet remembered the mysterious allusion that was Yule confined within the walls of the castle. That if she were merry, ate and drank well, and behaved, she'd be rewarded by some mysterious person who knew and saw everything. It was all about apple cider, dancing, and sharing in on joyful songs. She was supposed to dress pretty, clear her plate, and be polite to everyone who gave up their evening to join in on the magic. But for Zidane, well, he painted an entirely different picture.

For Zidane, it was the night Tantalus stayed in. No one went out for poker or forgotten purses on benches. They all dressed in tacky sweaters and played sweet little games and drank themselves silly. There were no presents involved. In fact, absolutely

nothing was at stake for them. It was seen as family time. Personal and intimate. Filled with laughter, shenanigans, and the lowest shelf of booze they could gather. Yule to Zidane wasn't about sucking up for a magical gift or doing everything absolutely by the book. It was all done on a whim without a care in the world. A small smile tugged at her lips as she imagined a young Zidane wearing the gaudiest sweater ever, balancing a piece of popcorn on the tip of his nose, laughing with his brothers when cider came out of Cinna's nose.

She pinned her cosmetics bag shut and crossed the chamber to stow it away. When she opened the cabinet, however, she paused when she saw a large box. It wasn't the best wrapping she had seen. It was puckered and crinkled in the corners. The bow was done with zero finesse. Slowly, she pulled it out, tilting the box back and forth. It seemed far too early for the mysterious, magical gift to arrive. Typically, it greeted her at the foot of her bed when she awoke the next morning. Garnet's skirt shifted and crinkled beneath her as she sank to the ground and tugged delicately at the bow. It gave way without much effort. Garnet glanced to the frosty windows before she took a deep breath and pulled the top off. She

was absolutely silent, her dark eyes staring into the box, before she set the lid aside and reached in.

It unfurled in front of her, presenting itself as a loud, gawky, heavy sweater. The collar and shoulders were a deep orange. The next stripe was blue. Then yellow. At the bottom, it was orange again. And stitched onto the chest was a holly with two golden bells dangling from it. Her very own Yule sweater. Garnet lowered it into her lap, a small smile on her lips. She laughed to herself, shaking her head. As she cast her eyes down, she noticed there was a notecard at the bottom of the box.

*For Dagger. Let Yule be merry and tacky, too.  
Love, Zidane.*

Garnet looked at the gift in her lap, running her fingers along the soft wool. The strands were thick and tightly intertwined. It seemed homemade, as if someone knitted it. Just where had Zidane found it? It seemed almost personal with the color palette. Despite never wearing orange anymore, she knew it symbolized herself in Zidane's eyes. She stood now, swirling the sweater out in front of her. Garnet paused for a moment, her eyebrows knitted together as she stared at the surprise gift. Slowly, she lowered it, her eyes drifting outside to the falling sleet.

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Down below, the band continued on with its merriment. Howls of laughter rang out as drinks were consumed with passion and vigor. People celebrated the falling snow as their bellies became warmer and warmer. By the stage of musicians, a few people had picked up a beat and their boots and heels clacked against the marble floors. The waiters hurriedly replaced empty dishes with new ones and cleared the foamy, forgotten glasses from every surface. The fireplace cackled loudly and happy couples found the mistletoes nestled around the grand ballroom. Three years without a beloved castle Yule party, everyone was absolutely delighted by how the comeback had sized up. Curtly, the band came to an end and loud applause rang out with several people raising their glasses in jubilation. The floors had become quite sticky with spiked apple cider.

It seemed the whole room knew what was next and turned in the direction of the tall and proud Yule tree that gleamed beneath the candlelight. Beside it, poised on either side of the large doors, were General Beatrix and Captain Steiner. They, too, had dressed up for the occasion. Beatrix sported a sparkly black form fitting dress that was modest and



easy to move in. Steiner was wrapped up nicely in a tuxedo with a vibrant red bow tie. They both were smiling, pleased to see a happy crowd and a happy party. Everyone knew it was overdue; it practically vibrated in the atmosphere.

“Tonight,” Steiner’s loud voice echoed across the grand space. “On behalf of the throne, we are pleased to welcome you to the Grand Yule Party of Alexandria. What a beautiful night it is. Legend has it, it symbolizes good luck to celebrate with a snowstorm brewing just beyond our doorsteps. We would like to present our first esteemed guest of the evening, your king-consort, Sir Zidane Tribal the First!”

Clapping immediately sprung up as Zidane’s name was announced. Steiner and Beatrix pulled the doors open to reveal a sharp looking Zidane who masked his sheepishness quite well. Zidane had never gotten used to being paraded out in front of dozens of people. He may have been a cut up and a trouble maker, but a thief certainly never vied for the spotlight. He wore a well-cut dark black tuxedo, though the coat was a bit tight in his shoulders. It was accented with a crisp white button up and he had gotten away with choosing a satin black tie that fell the length of his torso. His hair had been gelled,

but simply out of habit, he had raked it all out and it fell crisply around the frame of his face.

Zidane glanced to the Yule tree as he entered the boisterous room. As soon as the doors shut behind him, the band kicked off again and everyone's excitement riled up once more. The waiters were prompt on bringing Zidane a drink and several people greeted him and thanked him. Though, he couldn't exactly be sure what for. He tugged at his tie as he made his ways through the throngs of people chugging glasses and popping the finest hors d'oeuvres into their mouths. Finally, he found the windows, which let off a much needed chill from the glass. The snow was picking up as the hours crept into the night. He glanced to his right, watching a woman howl as her husband swung her around the make-shift dance floor. What was Yule to all these people?

Where was the wholesome stringing of popcorn? Where were the cards and marbles to play games with? Was Yule really just about drinking and not giving a care to the winter or truly to the people who were there? Tantalus may been snarky, silent thieves always looking for a quick buck, but when it came to Yule, Zidane felt like they were the most righteous in their coordination. Zidane missed those

times from when he was young. It was a parade of nights where everyone was committed to being home simply because it was better than being out and lurking around. Everything around him seemed so foreign and almost wrong to Zidane. But he thought back to what Garnet had said to him in that very spot days before. These Yule celebrations meant to her what his did to him. She had never known any different and Zidane couldn't fault her for that. If they made her happy, he wanted them to make him feel the same way. He'd just have to search for that pocket inside him that could accept it. Still, as he watched the heavy fleet drift by, he couldn't help but wonder what his brothers were up to that night.

The music stopped again and the crowds of people turned in unison like an army squadron at attention. Zidane arched his eyebrows and looked around before realizing everyone was turned to the Yule tree. Slowly, Zidane began to tilt through the crowd. The people parted easily, greeting him excitedly and patting his arms and back. He stopped just a few rows back to see Steiner and Beatrix in position. He took a long drink of his cider which stung down his throat. His eyes were then directed back at the Yule tree adorned in its glowing tinsel

and low flickering candles. He wondered just how many people that night had taken the time to admire all its little details and be amazed by its sheer presence in the massive ballroom. Zidane finished his drink, placing it on the platter of a passing waiter.

“The guest of honor for the night has arrived,” Beatrix announced, her dress glittering in the low lighting of the room. “The one who made this all possible, ladies and gentlemen of Alexandria, we present to you your queen, Garnet til Alexandros-Tribal XVII.”

The crowd went absolutely wild. Shrill yelps erupted, thunderous applause, hoots, and whistles. And when the doors open, they cut through the air, silencing the gathered people in its wake. Zidane looked back and forth at the guests who decidedly didn’t know what to think. He wondered why they had all stopped. Zidane craned his neck around the obnoxious hair-do in front of him to spy his wife. That’s when his jaw almost hit the ground.

Garnet stood in the doorway, seemingly unfazed by the sudden silence that greeted her. By all means, she looked like a goddess with her powdered make up and meticulous hairstyle. Her silver gown fell to

the floor in a sleek manner. But covering the torso and the arms, the true spectacle of the dress itself, was her Yule sweater. Zidane hadn't meant for her to find it yet. The one thing they shared in common with Yule was finding an offering at the foot of their bed in the morning. And yet, he had chosen the one cabinet she was doomed to open that evening. Zidane pushed forward in the next moment. The stunned guests said nothing as he pressed his hands to their arms and moved them from his path. He spilled out from the crowd and hurried up to Garnet, who was smiling despite her reception. Even Beatrix and Steiner seemed speechless.

“Dagger, what are you doing?” Zidane whispered, leaning in to her.

“Well, I found this new piece in my wardrobe,” Garnet shrugged, tugging at the coziness encasing her. “I thought tonight was the night to try it. I won't get to wear it for a whole other year, mind you.”

“What about your gown?” His voice seemed strained in that moment, gesturing to her. “I bet none of them even know what the hell you're wearing.”

“We can teach them,” Garnet told him. She leaned over, plucking something off the side table

next to the door. “Here, I brought yours for you, too.”

Slowly, he took it into his hands, his fingers running over the thick woolen strands. He pursed his lips and looked to Garnet. She seemed to be nothing short of encouraging. And yet, he still hesitated. This was Garnet’s Yule party. He certainly didn’t want to steal it away from her. Or make the people think he had indoctrinated her to be a loon of third class means. But he couldn’t let her be the only person wearing a Yule sweater. In the next beat, he pulled his tie loose and shrugged from his tight coat.

“Catch, Rusty,” Zidane said, tossing it with practically no warning. The Captain barely saved it from the floor. Zidane then wrangled the sweater over his head, tugging it to fit snugly around his body. Together, the couple share a quiet, sweet smile. It was a smile that was only theirs. No one else could know what it meant or what it said to one another. Zidane then grabbed her hand, lifting it into the air like she was a champion. “Ladies and gentlemen, my wife! Queen Garnet!”

Everyone seemed just drunk to go along with it and they clapped, despite maybe not understanding the twist in the party. Were they also supposed to

bring their great grandmother's clothes with them? The band took that as their cue and immediately kicked up a formal, jaunty tune. Garnet laced her fingers through Zidane's, tugging him after her. She walked backwards as she enticed him in her path. The crowd parted for her.

"We have your tradition, now we'll do mine," Garnet told him with a smile that made his heart leap in his chest. 'The King and Queen always have the formality of the first Yule dance.' They took the center of attention in the middle of the vast room. Beneath them, the floors were no longer polished, but sticky and hazy with spilt drinks. Their background was the wall of windows showing a quiet and delicate snowfall beyond them into the night. Zidane and Garnet quickly fell into step with everyone watching them. When Zidane's eyes were on Garnet, holding her slender body against him as they twirled in a circle, their staring didn't bother him. It was as if no one else in the world existed except for them. "So..." Garnet grinned coyly, plucking some lint from his shoulder. "Where did you get these sweaters, Zidane?"

His smile was boyishly crooked and he looked around for a moment. "If I tell you, it has to go with you to your grave, Dagger."

“I’m listening.”

Zidane still cast a glance to the room as if what he was about to say was grave. “Okay, well... Cinna knits them.”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m dead serious.”

“No, no,” Garnet laughed, throwing her head back as they spun in a circle. “You are absolutely pulling my leg.”

“It’s for real,” Zidane chuckled with her, relishing in the body heat emanating between them. “He’s very proud of them, too. Makes a new one for all of us every year. It’s why you never see him after Hollow’s Eve. He holes himself up in his room, soaks his feet in hot water, and knits like the old crone he’s always been destined to become.”

“Well, I feel the love in every stitch,” Garnet told him.

“I think that’s what he was aiming for,” Zidane nodded, her skirt brushing against his legs. “But next time we see him, you have to pretend like you don’t know who made it. It’s a Tantalus secret.”



“Oh, am I not privy to such things?” Garnet’s grin was sly. Zidane contemplated this for a moment, tilting his chin up.

“On second thought, you’re right. We have to destroy him over this.”

At this point, couples from the surrounding crowd joined hands and came out onto the dance floor. They fell in time with the swinging King and Queen, brushing past them and cooing over their obvious adoration. But Garnet and Zidane were in a world of their own, no longer confined to the ballroom. They were up in the snow clouds together, dancing the night away.

“You know, Yule isn’t just about what I want or even about what you want,” Garnet told him, her dark eyes gleaming in the candlelight. “It’s what we want, Zidane. We can make Yule be whatever we want it to be.”

Zidane smiled, running his palm along her waist. “You’re right. There’s no correct way to celebrate Yule. As long as we have each other, Yule is complete in my books. To hell with popcorn, marbles, and cards. All we need are these awful sweaters and one another.”

In the next moment, Zidane backed straight into someone. He began to turn to apologize, but stopped when he saw Steiner just behind him. He furrowed his brow, his eyes following his arm that dangled in the air. From the tips of his fingers swung a fragrant mistletoe hovering above Zidane and Garnet.

“Thanks for freshening the air, Rusty,” he deadpanned.

“Zidane,” Garnet laughed, grabbing his arm and directing his attention back to her. “Do you really not know what the mistletoe means?”

“Am I supposed to?”

“Oh, you silly fool,” Garnet could only shake her head as she brought her hand up to caress his cheek. “It means you’re supposed to kiss me, you idiot.”

“Well, that’s a Yule tradition I can get behind.”

Zidane wrapped his arms around Garnet and dipped her low to the ground. His lips found hers, planting them firmly and passionately. Around them, the crowd was cheering again, but it all fell on deaf ears. Zidane’s fingers knotted through her tacky Yule sweater, stitched with love by the old crone, and in that moment, everything felt so absolutely perfectly. It was a different holiday season. A *new* holiday

season. But Zidane wouldn't have it any other way or any other place. He was home. Finally. A full cycle around the sun complete. Everything was behind him now and he only had forward to look. Maybe he wouldn't be the best king, but he knew he'd be the greatest partner in crime. And, also, the tackiest party planner in all of the Mist Continent.

*The End*

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